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SUBJECT: Baby Buying: Selling Infants to China Sparks Outrage; Some Tactics Similar to Those Uncovered in American Adoptions

Ref: Hanoi 1299, 1465, 1820, 1834, 1843, 1856, 1893, 1912, 1928, 1977, 1979, 2082, 2109 and 2118

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1. (SBU) Summary: Over the past week, major Vietnamese media outlets have highlighted the case of four individuals arrested for smuggling newborn infants to China, among other abuses related to trafficking in children. One was an investigative report on a local baby-selling ring in Ha Tay province, on Hanoi's western border, citing the collusion of orphanage officials, local officials, medical staff, and possibly high-level officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These articles, and others before them, generate popular anger at criminals who traffic in infants, and also feed a general dissatisfaction with China. Given that criminal acts documented in these stories parallel those used by individuals involved in acquiring infants for adoption to the United States, it is possible that revelations in future articles could involve infants sought by American prospective parents. End summary.

2. (SBU) Vietnamese culture is strongly family-based. "Do you have a family yet?" is a standard get-to-know-you question. Parents are expected to live for their children, and for a married couple to be childless remains for many an assault on a long-standing social structure. National propaganda highlights the importance of family. Public buildings are decorated with images of a saintly Ho Chi Minh surrounded by children in his role as "Uncle Ho," and red banners over Hanoi streets encourage pregnant mothers to monitor their intake of vitamins. Recently, stories of child abuse sparked much debate and anguish - another demonstration of the devotion to children generally evidenced by the Vietnamese.

3. (SBU) On February 20, both Thanh Nien and Phap Luat newspapers ran articles providing detailed information on how impoverished Vietnamese women are pressured or tricked to give up their infant children so that the children can be sold to adoptive parents. The newspapers also announced the arrest of four infant traffickers by Hanoi police. The stories came on the tail of reports highlighting horrific conditions in orphanages, and in particular news that over half of the 19 infants who had been sent from nearby orphanages to a Hanoi hospital to be treated for pneumonia had died. These stories have caused public outrage.

4. (SBU) The wife of an orphanage director (herself an employee of the orphanage) was named as the leader of an infant trafficking ring in Ha Tay province, to the west of Hanoi. The ring allegedly colluded with local officials and medical staff to operate a baby-selling network, purchasing infant girls for a price of approximately 500 USD and infant boys for approximately 625 USD and later reselling the infants for more than double the price, between 1250 USD and 1525 USD. Some infants were resold abroad, usually to China. According to the ringleader, "We don't earn that much by just focusing on the domestic couples." Some children were taken from their mothers without any payment. The locality where the ring

operates has been the site of several child kidnappings. In recent months, Vietnamese papers have also reported cases of infant kidnappings in ethnic minority villages along the Chinese border and the arrest of kidnappers who intended to sell the infants to Chinese parents for adoption.

15. (SBU) Abuses like those described in these reports are consistent with the results of consular investigations conducted by Mission Vietnam, which have found that orphanage staff, local officials, police, and medical staff are often intricately involved in producing fraudulent documents in an effort to stock orphanages with children for international adoption. In one Ho Chi Minh City case, documents listed an infant as deserted at the hospital by its birth mother. Our investigation uncovered the birth mother's name and address. A follow-up interview revealed that she had not intended to relinquish the child; the child had been placed in an orphanage when she failed to pay the hospital bill. The child has been returned to its biological family. On February 20, consular staff spoke with a family living near the Chinese border which had placed their four-year-old child in a nearby orphanage in exchange for money to buy a pig; orphanage officials, who provided the payment, told the illiterate biological parents that their child would visit them "every few months." Without their knowledge and against their wishes, that child has been referred to an American family for adoption.

16. (SBU) Comment: The recent slew of press articles has had a decidedly anti-China perspective, feeding a historical distrust and animosity toward Vietnam's powerful northern neighbor. Watching a February 19 Vietnam television report while inside a crowded market along the Chinese border, a Hanoi consular officer heard the angry reactions of viewers as the reporter noted that after selling her still unborn child to the Chinese, traffickers planned to sell the birth mother, as well. This, in combination with the Vietnamese value on family and children, causes widespread public anger.

17. (SBU) Comment (continued): There is overwhelming evidence that

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the high prices paid by American adopting parents make the United States the most lucrative of all markets for baby traffickers. Post is concerned that the articles may also be a veiled warning to other countries. The spotlight could quickly shift to focus on the worst American adoption cases, with Americans replacing the Chinese as baby buyers. Given the high profile and sensitive nature of this issue, such an event has the potential to have a negative effect on broader foreign policy goals.

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